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TAGS: [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [EINT](#) [KPAO](#) [AJ](#)
SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN'S COORDINATION COUNCIL CREATES
CONTROVERSY OVER ALLEGED INTERNET CENSORSHIP

Classified By: POL/ECON CHIEF JOAN POLASCHIK PER 1.4 (B,D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: The Ministry of Communications and Information Technologies (MCIT) Coordination Council has sparked allegations of censoring information on the internet. The MCIT's Head of Internet, Services and Development Department Gulmammadov clarified that the Council serves as MCIT Minister Abbasov's nine-member advisory body charged with promoting internet access and usage, and increasing the rate of local domain rate registration. Gulmammadov emphasized that the Council does not, will not and cannot block access to a site or censor the information on it because it does not/not have the legal authority to change legislation or take action on any issues. Although some human rights activists and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe have alleged that the Council is limiting access to the internet, this does not appear to be the case. END SUMMARY.

Purpose: Limiting or Encouraging Internet Use?

12. (U) Econoff met with the Ministry of Communications and Information Technologies (MCIT) Head of Internet, Services and Development Department, Rufat Gulmammadov, to discuss the MCIT's Internet Development Coordination Council, a body that some Azerbaijani civil society members and the Council of Europe's (COE) Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) Co-rapporteur allege is working on limiting access to information on the internet. Gulmammadov strongly disagreed with the PACE report's characterization, saying that the GOAJ decided to form this Council because it is concerned about the slow pace at which internet availability and usage is spreading in Azerbaijan.

13. (U) According to Gulmammadov, the main purpose of the Coordination Council is to accelerate the development of the internet (availability and usage) and encourage domain name registration -- the opposite of what the PACE report alleges, he noted. Gulmammadov added that the GOAJ is concerned about the use and abuse of "az.com" and other Azerbaijani-related domain names. Since the GOAJ cannot buy all the domain names itself, he said, the Council will work to educate the Azerbaijani public on the benefits of registering for a domain name, will provide information on how to register, and will advise the Minister about how to increase local domain name registration.

How the Council Works--Advisory Capacity

14. (SBU) Continuing to address the allegations against the

Coordination Council, Gulmammadov emphasized that it is a nine-member advisory council for MCIT Minister Ali Abbasov, and that it has no/no legal authority to change legislation or take action on any issues. The Coordination Council cannot decide to close down a site or censor information on the internet, Gulmammadov said. Instead, the Council, which meets quarterly and includes members from the MCIT, NGO, academic and business communities, calls in experts to discuss topics of concern. Created in July 2007, Gulmammadov said the Council's first two meetings focused on "how to lower the price and improve the quality of the internet in Azerbaijan." With the help of experts, the Council forms an opinion and presents it in writing to Abbasov, Gulmammadov continued. The advice of the council can vary from the need for legislative changes to enable or encourage IT growth to the need for more informational programs or education. The Council is an attempt to reach out to more experts outside the MCIT, Gulmammadov said, to give Minister Abbasov the best advice possible. The final decision on what will be done belongs to the Minister, Gulmammadov stressed. Econoff emphasized the importance of ensuring freedom of expression on the internet; Gulmammadov reiterated that the Council does not and will not censor websites or material on the internet.

Civil Society Responds

15. (SBU) Civil society appears divided on the new Council. The Head of the Internet Freedom Forum, for example, said he is "deeply concerned" about the activities of the new Council. The Head of the Azerbaijan Internet Forum (AIF) said his organization had been invited to join the Council but elected not to participate, on the grounds that there is not much purpose to the Council. AIF believes there is sufficient legislation to regulate internet activities.

Comment

16. (C) The MCIT's Coordination Council does not view controlling access to information as part of its mandate, particularly since the Council does not have the legal authority to order the closure of internet sites or censoring of information. The Council appears to be what Gulmammadov said -- Minister Abbasov's attempt to gather a group of advisors and experts, including those outside the MCIT, to address problems of slow development of the internet in Azerbaijan. While there have been a few cases of internet censorship over the last year, it is reportedly Presidential Security that shut down or blocked internet access to an online petition protesting utility price increases and to a satirical blog that includes criticisms of the GOAJ and President Aliyev. The MCIT Coordination Council appears to have played no role in these cases.

17. (C) While it includes members from the NGO, academic and business communities, at least one of the external members reportedly has close ties to GOAJ officials in Presidential Security who are rumored to exert heavy influence over the IT sector. This underscores the question of how effective the Council could be in addressing underlying business reform issues needed to improve the IT situation in Azerbaijan. The reported ties to Presidential Security could also be the root of the concern over the Coordination Council, but it seems a stretch since the Council has no real power or heavy hitters playing a role. Whether the Council serves a purpose or is ineffectual remains to be seen, but it seems clear that it is not currently a threat to freedom of expression on the internet.

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